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Potential effects of psychological reactant consumers on relationships marketing programmes.

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Abstract :

This conceptual article presents the current criticisms to relationship marketing and important concepts developed in the psychology to understand consumer reactance toward services packaged as formal contracts. A first part presents the numerous questions that researches are raising about the willingness of people to commit to services. A second part shows that psychological reactance, already studied in the context of non product choice, is an interesting concept to revisit the relationship marketing paradigm: are all customers willing to commit to a service or are they forced against their own freedom? The last section develops an integrative conceptual framework of the different concepts introduced in this research.

Keywords :

Psychological reactance; relationship marketing; long term commitment; relationship orientation

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1. Introduction

The large financial investments required to develop new telecommunication technologies or efficient transportation systems are often justified through the return on investment during the life of a customer. To make sure that the retention of the customer is as long as possible, the new transportation and information services are most of the time available to clients through subscriptions which imply some kind of commitment and relationship between a supplier/provider and a customer. While the consumer is facing a growing number of commercial demands, he may develop psychological reactance (PR). As research and practices are moving from a transactional approach to a relational paradigm, psychological reactance, defined as the reaction of people against attempts to constrain their free behaviour (Brehm, 1966), may be an explanation of non subscription of services for some clients. Indeed, relationship marketing makes the assumption that consumers agree on the relational contract while it is not obvious that all customers are willing to drop some of their freedom of choice to enter in these relationships (Barnes, 1997). Even though the marketer is always offering more value to customers, he puts more pressure at the same time on the same customer (Dussart, 2005). This pressure is often materialised through a unidirectional commitment of the client towards the company. Should the client / company relation be a formal wedding ? However, the customer is now more and more aware of the marketing techniques and hence becomes more reluctant to business offers.

Moreover, relationship marketing works and practices are scarcely taking the lost of the client freedom as a cost for him until recent works develop the study of the cost of retention of

subscribers (Gustafson, Johnson and Roos, 2005). This conceptual article presents the current criticisms to relationship marketing and important concepts developed in the psychological field research to understand the attitude of consumer reactance toward services packaged as formal contracts. The field of services has been chosen for this study as the characteristics of services (e.g., intangibility, variability, heterogeneity...) reinforce the willingness of service companies to create and develop durable and deep relationships and commitment with their customers.

The paper is developed in three parts. A first section presents the numerous questions that researchers are raising about the willingness of people to commit to services. A second part will show that psychological reactance, as developed by psychologists and consumer researchers in a product transaction context, is an interesting concept to revisit the relationships marketing paradigm: are all customers willing to commit to a service or are they forced against their own freedom? The last section of the article builds an integrative conceptual framework of the different concepts introduced in this research.

2. Relationship marketing development and limits

2.1. Components of relationship marketing

Morgan and Hunt (1994) have defined relationship marketing as “establishing, developing and maintaining successful relational exchanges”. Relationship marketing has also been defined more precisely as an “effort to identify, build and sustain a network of individual consumers, and the continuous strengthening of this network in the advantage of both parties by means of interactive, personal, and value-adding contacts during a long period” (Shani and Chalasani, 1992, p. 44). The notions of networking, interactivity and success are central to relationship marketing. Indeed, relationship marketing is theoretically built upon three main

components: long term commitment, mutual knowledge win-win partnership (Grönroos, 2001).

Long term commitment is key to networking, and a condition to establish reliable partnerships. Customers are aware of it, even though it is not always accepted. Commitment can be defined as a “buyer’s enduring desire to continue a relationship with a seller accompanied by his willingness to make efforts at maintaining it” (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). Authors assume a positive link between relationship satisfaction and commitment (*e.g.*, Bolton, 1998; Ganesan, 1994). Ganesan (1994) finds strong empirical support for the path from satisfaction to long-term orientation. Moorman, Zaltman, and Deshpandé (1992) suggested that buyers who are committed to a relationship might have a greater propensity to act because of their need to remain consistent with their commitment to avoid cognitive dissonance. Commitment is complex; it is viewed as a multidimensional construct. A generally accepted approach in the literature presents “commitment” as being two-dimensional: (1) affective commitment, emotion based feeling which involves a certain degree of reciprocity and (2) calculative commitment, a colder and more rational economic-based relation (Gustafsson, Johnson & Roos, 2005). It reflects both emotional and cognitive consumer decision processes. Similarly, Gutiérrez et al. (2004) propose three aspects to describe commitment: one referring to the true current behaviour, promises and sacrifice – behavioural dimension-, another that contemplates desires and feelings –affective dimension- and a third one that indicates the intention of future commitment. Customer loyalty is then presented as a major consequence of relational policies based on trust and commitment (Morgan et Hunt, 1994; Garbarino et Johnson, 1999).

While “commitment” seems natural to customers engaged in relationships marketing, the two other characteristics of Relationship Marketing, mutual knowledge and win-win partnership, may be challenged. Indeed, a commercial relationship is most of the time deeply

asymmetrical. The company is knowing much more of the customers, with the help of databases and data mining research methods, than the customers of the company. Moreover, customers often have the feeling that companies mostly work on making profits rather than taking their interests into account. Wouldn't be legitimate for consumers to doubt about the sincerity of the firm empathy?

The emerging field research on consumer resistance and ethics, On the basis of the micro power developed by Foucault, marketing tools and practices are described as disciplinary processes in order to develop a social control on customers (Marsden, 2001 *in* Roux, 2006): information and intelligence techniques are allowing companies to better know their customers, segmentation techniques allow categorizations, communication techniques influence customers... When these customers get aware of the existence of these information and manipulation, they may become suspicious and reactant. The continuous merger of CRM and data mining techniques is raising concerns among consumers. The necessity of long term commitment of the client, the deficient win-win partnership, as the doubts of customers about the overt behaviour of firms, are sources of limits to the development of relationships marketing.

Relationship marketing traditional approach requires conditions which are rarely available. Hence, consumers may doubt of the sincerity of the company to develop links rather than just selling goods and services.

2.2. Customer own interest in relationship marketing

Scholars have developed relationship marketing with the interest of the company as primary objective. When the customer's interest is taken as the research focus, the perspective may change. Fournier and al. (1998, p. 44) have outlined a major limit to relationship marketing: "we haven't looked close enough to see that the consumer is not necessarily a willing

participant in our relationship mission”. There is a need to understand the choice that companies make between transactional and relational marketing. Further research should investigate how marketing practices reflect perceived customer need structures and customers’ preferences for transactional and/or relational exchange (Coviello and al., 2002).

As increased marketing actions raise the number of solicitations toward customers, some fellows have worked on the assumption that customers may have different levels of **relationship orientation**. Lovelock (1983) and Oldano (1987) propose to segment the market according to desired type of business relationship. Barnes (1997) makes the distinction between two types of customers: those who desire a deep and warm relationship and those who are looking for a more distant relationship. This concept is also called client’s relational predisposition and defined as an enduring tendency of the customer to expect and value a relational approach from its service provider. A relational approach is viewed as: a bilateral relationship; a long term commitment; a personalized and tailored-made service (Bahia and Perrien, 2003).

According to their level of relational predisposition, customers are more or less willing to accept one or another type of business exchange (relational or transactional) (Benamour and Prim, 1999).

2.3. Relative acceptance by the customer of relational and transactional exchange

Although the relevance of transactional and relational marketing variables seems obvious, knowledge about the conditions of their use is still limited (Jackson, 1985; Perrien, 1998; Fruchter & Sigué, 2005). “The challenge for academics and managers, then, is to make sound predictions of the effectiveness of the two types of marketing activities for different products, **customers** and market conditions” (Fruchter & Sigué, 2005).

Authors study the relational/ transactional customer orientation along three different approaches: (1) The link between the customer personality and the global attitude towards the relationship (Perrien & Ricard, 1995, Ricard & Perrien 1996; Barnes, 1997) with a variable such as consumer relationship proneness; (2) the consequences of the relationship such as psychological, social, and economic benefits (Barnes, 1997; Gwinner & al, 1998); (3) the contextual elements such as service characteristics -importance, involvement, quality, complexity- (Berry, 1995; Benamour & Prim, 1999).

The “**consumer relationship proneness**” (CRP), as a mediating variable between the impact of need for social affiliation and behavioural intentions (Bloemer and al., 2003), opens new directions to study the impact of personality on relationship marketing. For these authors, CRP represents a personality trait that reflects a consumer’s relatively stable and conscious tendency to engage in relationships with sellers of a particular product category. From a service encounter perspective, CRP can be expected to play a crucial role in a people-based service encounters (like hairdressers or dentists). In line with the literature on interpersonal relationship they define the **need for social affiliation** (NSA) as a preference to be with other people and to engage in relationships. People with a high need for social affiliation do not look for social rewards, but are rather intrinsically valuing the relationships with other people. From a commercial friendship perspective, the concept of NSA has been referred to as sociability (Price and Arnould, 1999) and can be considered as “a tendency to affiliate with others and to prefer being with others to remaining alone”. Price and Arnould (1999) regard sociability as one of the factors potentially contributing to the formation of commercial friendship in a services setting. Forman and Sriram (1991) claimed that people in search for human contact are willing to engage in long-term relationships. Development of postmodern tribes and brand communities, sometimes out of the control of the brands, represents an emerging type of relationships between consumers (Cova, 1997; Muniz and O’Guin, 2001)

Gwinner and al. (1998) argue that customers look for different types of benefits in a business exchanges and that according to which type of benefits they value, they will prefer transactions or relational exchanges. Findings from two studies across three categories of services indicate that consumer relational benefits can be categorized into three distinct types of benefits: **(1) social benefits**: beyond the benefits of the basic service, customers search for fraternization and likable relationships. Therefore, they are looking for certain personal recognition; **(2) psychological benefits**: they are often linked with comfort, feelings of security and particularly trust or confidence in the provider; **(3) customization benefits**: the final category of relational benefits relates to customization of the offered service. According to which type of benefits they value customers can be categorized. Another attempt to use this approach was proposed by Prim-Allaz and Sabadie (2003). These authors demonstrate that in the French banking and medical contexts, it is possible to identify two main categories of customers: those who only value social benefits and those who value both social and economic benefits.

Finally, customer relationship orientation is also presented as being linked to the situation. Benamour & Prim (1999) believe that the same customer may have different level of relationship orientation according to its implication in the buying situation or the level of perceived risk. This concept is also called client's relational predisposition and defined as an enduring tendency of the customer to expect and value a relational approach from its service provider (Bahia & Perrien, 2003).

3. Reactance to long term commitment

3.1. Psychological reactance

As mentioned in the first paragraph of this paper, relationship marketing is widely based on commitment (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). This commitment can be either contractual or not. In

the first case, the formalization of the commitment may be seen by customers as a formal and infeasible tie. This tie may then be interpreted as a threat to the customer freedom of choice as for some promotional influence, manipulative advertisement, ... (Clee & Wicklund, 1980). The contractualization may be seen by some customers as a threat to their freedom for future choices. As a consequence, some customers develop strategies to reply to this feeling of freedom reduction through a commitment refusal. Actually, customers may have different cognitive, affective and behavioural consequences for different levels of perceived decision freedom.

Lessner and Venkatesan (1989) suggest that Psychological Reactance should be applicable to a limited set of conditions where consumers' freedom of choice is threatened. They also suggest "that the theory [should] not be tested in the strict theory testing perspective but rather that the theory [should] be used as a guiding framework in investigations of important phenomena".

Psychological reactance (PR) is "the motivational state that is hypothesized to occur when a freedom is eliminated or threatened with elimination" (Brehm & Brehm, 1981, p. 37). The theory indicates that when a perceived freedom is eliminated or threatened with elimination, the individual will be motivated to re-establish that freedom. Given that an individual perceives a specific freedom, any force on the individual that makes it more difficult for him or her to exercise that freedom constitutes a threat (Brehm, 1966; Brehm & Brehm, 1981). Two major antecedents to Psychological Reactance were identified (Brehm, 1966; Wicklund, 1974) : the strength to freedom and trait reactance freedom. The first one is situational : "the number of equally valued alternatives is the most important antecedent of perceived decision freedom" (Walton & Berkowitz, 1985). The second one recognizes that individuals may vary in their trait proneness to reactance arousal (Shen and Dillard, 2005). Indeed Psychological Reactance is associated with defensiveness, dominance and aggressiveness (Dowd and

Wallbrown, 1993). Reactant people have a tendency to act without considering potential consequences (Buboltz et al., 2003).

There are three types of threats to freedom: (1) interpersonal or social threats; (2) impersonal¹ threats and (3) self-imposed threats. In research as the present one, the focus is put on interpersonal and social threats.

In persuasion models, PR is presented as a mediator between communication and attitude/behaviour (Fitzsimmons & Lehmann, 2004; Dillard & Shen, 2005). Direct restoration of freedom involves doing the forbidden act. In addition, freedom may be restored indirectly by increasing liking for threatened choice, derogating the source of threat, denying the existence of threat or by exercising a different freedom to gain feeling of control and choice (Dillard & Shen, 2005).

Persuasive attempts of all sorts, including public health campaigns, often fail to produce the desired effect. In some cases, they even produce results directly at odds with their intent. The theory of PR provides one theoretical perspective through which these miscarriages might be understood. The theory contends that any persuasive message may arouse a motivation to reject the advocacy. That motivation is called reactance (Dillard & Shen, 2005). From this inception to the present, the theory may be called upon to explain resistance to long-term commitment.

One of the reason why there has been so little empirical research on PR in the context of consumer behaviour may be that the theory is not seen as having managerial ramifications (Lessne et Venkatesan, 1989). According to us, this point of view was relevant in a transactional perspective but is no longer defensible in a relational perspective which implies customers' long term commitment. Psychological Reactance should take place among other

¹ Interpersonal threats involve influence attempts while impersonal don't.

concepts to predict the propensity to sign a long term contract. Table 1 is summarising the different personality related concepts developed to explain the lack of direct link between satisfaction and commitment.

Table 1 – Personality related concepts to commitment

	Definition
Need for social affiliation	Preference to be with other people and to engage in relationships (Bloemer et al., 2003)
Opportunism	Opportunistic behaviours arise when the consumer makes sure to stay aware of competitive promotional offers in order to take advantage of them, whatever the link he may have with the current service provider (N'Goala, 2003).
Customer relationship orientation <i>or</i> relational predisposition	Enduring tendency of the customer to expect and value a relational approach from its service provider (Bahia & Perrien, 2003). There are different approaches to relationship orientation: according to the benefits the customer values; according to contextual elements and according to personality traits (<i>cf. infra</i> , customer relationship proneness) –Benamour & Prim, 1999-.
Customer relationship proneness	Personality trait that reflects a consumer's relatively stable and conscious tendency to engage in relationships with sellers of a particular product category (Bloemer et al., 2003)
Commitment	Buyer's enduring desire to continue a relationship with a seller accompanied by his willingness to make efforts at maintaining it (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). It implies the adoption of a long term orientation toward the relationship –a willingness to make short-term sacrifices to realize long-term benefits from the relationship (Dwyer, Schurr & Oh, 1987; Anderson & Weitz, 1992). Commitment is a motivational phenomenon (Wiener, 1982) Commitment is generally considered as multi dimensional.
Affective commitment	Degree to which the membership is psychologically bonded to the organization on the basis of how favourable it feels about the organization (Gruen & al., 2000)
Calculative commitment	Degree to which a membership is psychologically bonded to the organization on the basis of the perceived costs (economic, social, and status related) associated with leaving the organization, based on the self-interest stake in a relationship (Gruen & al., 2000).
Psychological reactance	Reaction of people against attempts to constrain their free behaviour (Brehm, 1966)

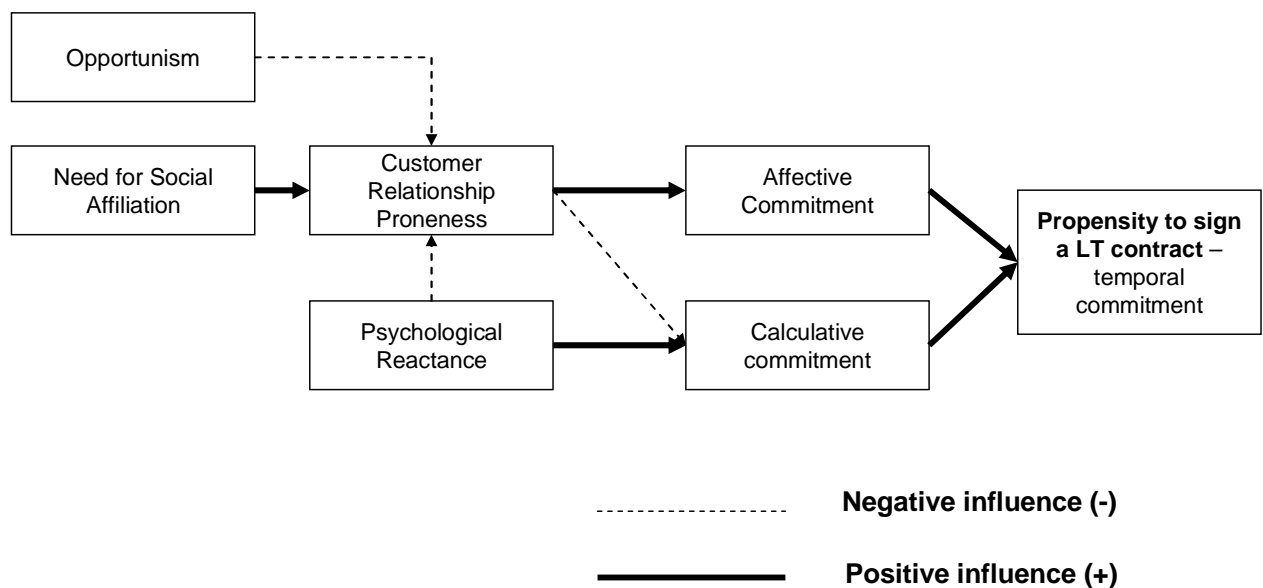
3.2. Integrative conceptual framework

Based on this literature review, we suggest to develop a set of hypothesis and propose a theoretical model. The first aim of this research is to explain why some customers accept to engage in long term contracts while others are reactant. Contracts have this specificity that they are not reducing present choices (customer may or may not contract) but future choices (as soon as the contract is signed, they may have reduced choices).

As seen in the literature, we assume that there is a positive relationship between the level of commitment and positive behaviours toward a long-term relationship (Gutiérrez et al, 2004; Gruen, 1995; Morgan and Hunt, 1994). The level of commitment may be the consequence customer relationship proneness (Bloemer et al., 2003).

Customer relationship proneness (CRP) is the concept chosen to represent the relationship orientation. CRP is a consequence of both customer opportunism –negative link- (Prim-Allaz & Sabadie, 2003) and need for social affiliation –positive link- (Bloemer et al., 2003). More the customer relationship proneness is high, more the affective commitment is increasing.

Figure 1 - Theoretical model



The psychological reactance (PR) is an antecedent of Customer Relationship Proneness and of calculative commitment. When psychological reactance is high, customer relationship proneness level will decrease and as a consequence will weaken the importance of affective commitment. However, psychological reactant people may select to sign a long term contract when the calculated commitment is strong enough. Reactant people may favour quality and price attributes instead of relationship meanings. Psychological reactance influences calculated and affective commitment through a trade-off evaluation with CRP.

The propensity to sign a long term contract (such as subscriptions to an internet provider, to a phone company or with a health doctor) will be determined either for calculated or for affective reasons. Two different types of commitment may appear which will create variance between the individuals. A unique loyalty program may not be suitable to both segments of people. As suggested by Roux (2006) the link between non loyalty and reactance will have to be investigated. The recent works on brand communities should also be revisited through the psychological reactance framework. Indeed, psychological reactant people may appear to be reluctant to adhere to clubs and communities, for the same reason they reject bindings in contracts. However brand communities may attract reactant people when these postmodern tribes don't develop relationships with the parent brands.

4. Conclusion

To answer to the current question “are all customers willing to commit to a service or are they forced against their own freedom?”, the use of psychological concepts is proposed. Psychological reactance seems to offer very interesting research avenues in understanding the differences of commitment between customers in long term relationships. This paper ends with the proposition of an integrative conceptual framework based on five main concepts: psychological reactance; customer relationship proneness; calculated and affective

commitment; and propensity to sign a long term commitment. This model has now to be tested. This will require important efforts for scale developments.

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